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# Elijah, Two Widows, and Faith

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 10 November 2024

1 Kings 17:8-16 • Hebrews 9:24-28 • Mark 12:38-44

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May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Our Old Testament passage today is a wonderful story of faith, service and the power of God exercised through love. In his first appearance in the Bible, we find Elijah, the great prophet, going from Samaria, the capital of Israel, on his way to the Mediterranean coast. (Elijah, by the way, was a Tishbite. Yes, a Tishbite. Doesn't that word just make you smile? It means he was from Tishbe, a village on the east side of the Jordan river, opposite Samaria.) The land is under a drought, which God brought upon it to punish the wicked kings of Israel, who had angered God by worshipping idols and not keeping God's laws. God spoke through Elijah to Ahab, then king of Israel, telling him that there would be no rain for two or three years to come. To protect Elijah from Ahab's anger — since kings in those days tended to kill prophets who gave them bad news — God sends Elijah on a journey,

ultimately to a small coastal town called Zarephath; and God tells Elijah that he will meet a woman there who will feed him.

Elijah indeed meets the widow, and soon finds that she is suffering as a result of the drought. The crops have failed and she has nearly run out of flour and oil to feed herself and her boy, for she is a widow, and apparently has no other family to take care of her. She brings Elijah some water and tells him how things are with her. Elijah, inspired by God, tells the woman that she may indeed make cakes for them all, for the Lord will provide for her. And she goes and makes the cakes, and the flour and oil do not run out — indeed they do not run out for many days, until God again brings rain to the area.

This woman shows great faith in God, great trust that God will provide for her. Is great faith born out of desperation? Or, if we trust God to start with, will God strengthen our faith just when we really need it? For, in the story, Elijah tells her to make the cakes, but she is to bring the first cake to him. Now she knows that she only has enough oil and flour to serve one man. She must trust God to provide, or she and her son would begin to starve after giving Elijah the only cake she can make.

We see great faith in the Gospel story as well. Jesus is watching people donate to the temple treasury: some rich men, who make a big show of throwing in large amounts of money, and a poor woman, who puts in two of the smallest coins. The poor woman, also a widow, who brings the two small coins, must likewise trust in God to bring her more money on which to support herself. Jesus tells us it is “all she had to live on” (Mark 12:44). Yet she gives it to the temple, to glorify God.

Such great faith! We do not learn exactly what happens to the widow at the temple, but Jesus calls his disciples’ attention to her faith as an example for them. We do know that God’s love protected the woman in Zarephath. God’s love is great, and God rewards our belief.

The Christian life is one of faith in God, and sometimes demands great faith. The two widows show us how they kept their faith in what were truly life-or-death situations. What about less critical situations — the problems we run into from day to day? The Apostle Paul was fond of an argument known as “arguing from the lesser to the greater,” and he used it several times in his letters. In our case, we might say, “If we are able to trust in God in the little things, how much more may we trust God in the greater things?” And of course there is the converse: if we are *afraid* to trust God in the lesser things, how will we trust God when we are in great need? (And how will God respond to us, if we don’t have faith?) The life of faith is built up little by little, as we come to know God more and more through prayer, the study of the Bible and, if we are fortunate, personal revelation. For those who are

new to faith particularly (although for all of us, really) it takes time to fully realise the extent of God's love, which is always there for us. I give thanks to God daily for the growth we've seen in our parish, and sometimes I chastise myself when I get to worrying about future growth. I have no need to worry. If I truly love and trust God, then God will provide. God will use us as his hands and feet; God will inspire us to do the things we need to do to grow our church; and like the vegetables many of us grow in our gardens, we will water, and God will give the growth. There is no need for worry if we have faith.

In this time of social uncertainty, when more and more people have dropped away from the church, it is more important than ever that we who follow Christ keep our faith alive and active. God will call his people back; but in the meantime, it is up to us keep the belief in God's love alive, as an example to all. Do not hide the light of your faith under a bushel; be always welcoming, patient, and kind. Jesus calls us to invite others to know his love, as he always invited his people to walk with him in his days on earth. Challenge your faith: ask yourself if you trust God enough that you can stop worrying about life and simply live it, in God's grace — because you can. You certainly can. God's promise to us is real, and we will, someday, know the tremendous joy of being in God's direct presence. That is the ultimate gift of God's grace to all believers, and in Jesus' name we give thanks. Amen.